

Chapter 23: To Protect And Serve

One week later.

She missed her family, more than she could've fathomed. Emma S. was surprised at the magnitude of it. Nearly two decades of field work that took her away from home for extended times, and she'd never missed Candace and James Spooler this badly. Not to the extent it felt like a hole ripped in her chest. Which was a pretty apt description if she thought about Dylan, Norma, or Norman for more than a few minutes.

But when she made herself focus on the investigation, it felt good to be back in the game. Even though she and her subordinates were tasked with only surveilling so far, Emma S. would take even that monotony. She, Agent Rivera, and Agent Jameson were holed up in a long-abandoned office building across the street from a dockside warehouse in one of Seattle's seedier neighborhoods. According to a tip from a confidential informant, Fieretti's operation brought in kidnapped women on boats to this dock and kept them chained in the warehouse while they broke them in. The C.I. had reported a new shipment was coming in soon, but he didn't know exactly when.

Agent Spooler took her turns at the telescope trained out the window, spying on the dregs of Seattle society. Plenty of transactions between street hookers and their customers, and more than a few drug purchases, but no Fieretti or the rest of his gang. Em flipped through a file folder to a photo of that black car that had been lurking around Norma's parking lot a couple of weeks ago. She was sure it had been Fieretti, and he'd turned tail and run once he caught wind of the FBI's presence. But she couldn't prove it.

Speaking of her sister, Em's phone chimed with a text from Norma:

Norma: Anything exciting happening?

Emma S.: Not a thing. Just playing Rear Window lol You?

Norma: About to go to the movies with Norman :)

Emma S.: Sounds way more fun. I miss you guys.

Norma: We miss you too! Stay safe!

Emma S.: I will

A loud knocking on the door startled her. She and the other two immediately jumped up and drew their weapons. Their shift change wasn't until dawn, it was barely past eight, and no civilians should know they were there. Em yanked the door open, and three FBI agents ended up with their guns pointed at a freaked-out-looking Alex Romero.

"Stand down, lower your weapons!" She ordered the other two. Then her hand shot out and seized Romero by the jacket, yanking him inside before slamming the door shut. "Get your ass in here now!!"

Romero couldn't get one word out before she laid into him, "WHAT the FUCK are you doing here?! Jesus, we could've shot you!! What the hell, Alex?!"

He managed to extricate himself from her grip, "Calm down, Emma. Just let me explain--"

"You've got three seconds to start explaining! This better be good!"

Romero was still recovering from the shock of the feds' welcome. Or lack thereof. He'd known he was risking the wrath of Agent Spooler when he made the decision to drive out of White Pine Bay and head north. It had started out as a spontaneous drive to clear his head, after learning the game-changing news about his town's future. But he found himself turning onto the interstate and making the nearly-five-hour trek to Seattle.

Romero knew she'd likely throttle him for this, but he tracked Agent Spooler's personal iPhone's GPS. She was never without either of those phones. It took about an hour of driving around until he found the empty, dark office building where the tracking signal was coming from. More time was spent searching through the abandoned, creepy hallways, but he took a chance on one door after seeing the thin line of light coming from underneath it. He was proven correct.

"I came here because I want to help you catch the rest of these guys. Plus I have a proposition I think you'll find interesting." Romero began.

Agent Spooler glared at him, "We don't need your help, or want it. We're going to end up doing a raid, and I will not have you putting my squad in danger! It's already going to be dangerous enough!"

"There's nothing left for me in White Pine Bay. I'm not going back."

Em noticed Rivera and Jameson were watching them, hanging on every word after being starved for any entertainment. She barked sharply at them, "I didn't notice any of the Fieretti gang inside this room, gentlemen! Eyes forward! And I'm taking ten." With that, she grabbed Romero by the arm and pulled him into an adjoining empty office, shutting the door behind them.

Romero already tired of her manhandling him like this, but he tolerated it because he needed to say what he came to say. If he put up much of a fight, three well-trained FBI agents were sure to eject him from the building.

“Have you lost your fuckin’ mind?” Agent Spoole demanded. “I thought that was your precious little fiefdom to protect, so that sounds insane.”

“Marijuana’s legal in Oregon now, both recreationally and medically. There’s already talk that one of the major growing families is going to pack up and leave town.”

“Yeah, so? I saw that on the news. What does it have to do with this?”

“So it means I want to make more of a difference as far as catching real criminals, like these traffickers. I’m done playing both sides of the law as far as protecting a bunch of pot-growers. There are no longer two sides, only one left.” he went on.

Agent Spoole rubbed her eyes with one hand, clearly exasperated. “We have these things called phones, you know. You couldn’t have picked yours up and called me to tell me this?”

“No. What else I have to tell you, I want to tell you to your face. The night before you left, I was at McCormick’s picking up some dinner, and I saw you with your nephew. Dylan’s his name, right?”

Her blood suddenly felt cold in her veins. But she kept her same defiant expression, not taking her eyes from his. “Again, so the hell what? I’ve spent time alone with both my nephews and my sister. What the fuck business is it of yours?”

“It’s funny. I’ve never seen any aunt and nephew enjoying each other’s company that much. You looked like you were on a romantic date, of sorts.”

“You are really a fucking piece of work, Alex Romero.” she fired back. “You show up here and disrupt my stake-out. Then you make these kinds of insinuations about my personal life. You need to hit the goddamn bricks right now! And stay far the fuck away from my investigation!” She jabbed a finger towards the hallway door.

Romero had anticipated this curse-laden response from her. He folded his arms across his chest and dangled the bait he had in front of her, hoping she'd snap at it.

“Oh really? I don't think so. I thought that maybe what I saw between you two was my imagination, so I did a little more investigating of my own. I went by your sister's motel earlier today and had a little talk with her. I asked her some questions about you, whether you were involved with anyone. She got pretty nervous and evasive. Now, why would she act like that? I think if there's anything to this, your superior would be very interested in it.”

“That's bullshit, and we both know it! You're lying. Norma would've told me that immediately!”

He was lying, but he saw that he got the point across. “I'm willing to keep quiet about it, to anyone. If you'll do a few things for me.”

Her icy blue eyes locked onto his dark ones. What she saw in them, he was no longer hiding it: jealousy, hurt, longing.

Great. This is the last thing I need. Those feelings could turn Romero into a big problem quickly.

“All right. Let's talk.” her voice was even despite the fear deep inside her. “What do you want?”

“First, I want to come back to D.C. with you. I applied to the Metro Police Department, and they need a recommendation letter. Second, I want you to write that for me.”

Agent Spoole folded her arms under her breasts and smiled coldly. With no clue of it, Romero was playing right into her hands. Her mind briefly flashed back to 12 years prior. She'd still been working with Agent Duncan Carlisle, after their romantic relationship had ended. During that time, she'd become acquainted with Agent Carlisle's (at the time) father-in-law: Burton Delaney. She'd learned Delaney and his associates had far-reaching influence into the upper levels of the FBI, the Pentagon, Congress, and who knows where else. These were powerful men, and they definitely did not always operate within the confines of the law. She was unaware of it, but Delaney and Agent Carlisle had been behind a nearly-successful presidential assassination. How many other such operations they were responsible for: also, who knows?

Delaney had issued Agent Spoole an open favor, which she had never used, never considered using until now. There was a caveat: he'd eventually want that favor repaid. It could be in a month, a decade, any time. It would make her a rogue agent, essentially a hired gun for Delaney. So, if Romero was in the same city, and if he ever made any further threats or ultimatums against her family, all she'd have to do was make one phone call. Then Mr. Former Small Town Sheriff would disappear. Permanently.

She thought of Dylan, Norman, and Norma. Her family would be worth it. They were worth everything.

“That's all?” she asked Romero, coming back to the present. “Fine. I'll do it. But you're not traveling with me. You're on your own for that.”

“Fair enough.” he smiled back at her. “One more thing.”

“What?”

“Put me on your squad for the raid on Fieretti.”

“I will if I can have a guarantee you’ll do EXACTLY what I tell you! Or what Rivera tells you. I mean any little thing. You won’t so much as breathe in the wrong direction unless either of us gives the order. You understand me?”

“Perfectly. You’ve got that guarantee.”

“You know what, Alex? I think D.C. Metro will be perfect for you. You’ll be starting at the bottom, and they’ll take your arrogant ass down a few pegs. Hopefully they’ll teach you a little thing called humility. I’m going to write you a hell of a glowing recommendation.”

“However it has to be. It’s what I want. One thing I want that I can have, anyway.”

That loaded statement she chose not to respond to. What could she have said? On one hand, the guy was suffering a case of unrequited love. Part of her felt bad about crushing someone’s soul underfoot. But then again, that love had spawned jealousy, which was an ugly, dangerous thing. It had driven him to threaten her, the man she WAS in love with, and by extension the rest of her family. Romero still had no idea who he was truly tangling with. If he pushed her any further, she’d do what was necessary.

Agent Spoole informed Agents Rivera and Jameson, “Sheriff Romero’s offered his assistance with the raid. Play nice unless you want to be written up. I am not kidding.”

Hours dragged by as she kept ruminating over those same thoughts, smoking three cigarettes in a row, silently cursing Romero for driving her to fall off the wagon but still daring anyone to say anything about it. They didn't.

It was a few minutes before midnight when an inconspicuous-looking white fishing boat pulled up and docked in front of the warehouse. Not exactly a prime hour for fishing. People who went out on boats in the dead of night did so to hide what they were up to, nearly without exception.

Agent Spoole zoomed the high-power telescope further. Sure enough, she counted six men in dark clothes roughly ushering a group of smaller figures with black hoods over their heads. Their movements were quick, but she caught sight of the chains locked around their wrists, attaching them together. There were ten of who appeared to be captive young women, probably most them still teenagers. A final figure followed this group off the boat and up the dock. He was in a dark trench coat and heavy Clark-Kent-style glasses. His hair was grayer than in the mugshots the Bureau had of him. But no mistake: It was Joe Fieretti.

"It's them. Come on, let's roll!" Agent Spoole flipped on her walkie and started barking orders to the rest of the squad stationed elsewhere close by.

Things seemed to fast-forward as Romero followed them out of the room, down the hall, into a service elevator that took them to an alley where an FBI SWAT van was waiting. Spoole, Rivera, Jameson, and three more agents suited up with Kevlar vests, bullet-proof helmets, tasers, and what else he didn't catch. She threw him a vest and helmet as well. It felt strange to have something on with "FBI" instead of "Sheriff," but the adrenaline was pumping and he couldn't deny a certain level of excitement.

Then she opened a storage compartment in the van and handed out Heckler and Koch MP5 submachine guns. "You ever fired one of these? Don't answer that." she

said as she handed him one. “This shoots 10mm bullets, 30 rounds in the magazine.” She slammed the long mag in place for him. “Flip this switch for the laser sight, this one for the flashlight. Use this switch to change from one round, a two-shot burst, or fully automatic. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it.” Romero looped the weapon’s strap over his shoulder and tried to familiarize himself fast with what she’d instructed.

“Stay right behind me and Rivera, no matter what.” Then she instructed the rest of the squad as well, “Fieretti’s not going to go quietly. Chances are high he’s gonna take a hostage. If he does, put him down with a non-fatal shot, ONLY if you have a clear shot and won’t hit the hostage! We need to bring him in alive. The rest of them may surrender right away, but might not. Check every corner and be prepared for anything.”

Suited up, the squad reached the warehouse and fanned out, Romero, Spooler, and Rivera taking a side door. No outside threats were waiting for them. Rivera shot the padlock off the door, and the three of them plunged into the darkness.

Time sped up even faster, amid shouts of “FBI!”, screams of terrified girls, and gunfire. Three of Fieretti’s foot soldiers gave up on the first sight of submachine guns trained on them, falling to their knees with their hands in the air, and were cuffed within seconds. One fired on the agents in another part of the building, and he met his end with a bullet in the chest. The remaining two needed to be rousted out of hiding among a bunch of wooden crates, but they gave themselves up soon after.

The kidnapped women had been chained with their arms over their heads, locked around pipes extended from the ceiling. “Cover us!” Agent Spooler ordered Romero. She and Rivera pulled out pairs of small bolt-cutters and freed the girls. “It’s okay. We’re here to help you. You’re safe now.” she assured each of them. They likely

spoke no English, but she said it anyway. Then her prediction proved correct: there were nine women they just freed. There had been ten coming off the boat.

“One’s missing. So’s Fieretti. Come on,” Rivera told them. The three of them moved as a unit through the warehouse, pointing their flashlights into every dark corner. Romero’s heart was slamming in his chest; he was amazed he could hear anything over the roaring adrenaline coursing through him. But he was going to finish this. He was going to prove himself, if not to her then at least to the rest of these federal agents.

“Drop your guns. Or I blow her head to pieces.” A cold, deadly calm voice came from near a window at the very back of the warehouse. He had his arm locked around the neck of a sobbing black-haired young woman, a large .45 pointed against the side of her head.

“Fieretti. We’ve taken this entire building. Your colleagues have already given up. It’s over. Give yourself up.” Agent Spooler told him, she moved sideways to her right, the laser sight of her weapon centered on Fieretti’s chest. She couldn’t fire without hitting the girl though. Romero fanned out to her left, and Rivera started circling behind Fieretti, both trying to get a clean shot.

“Take one step closer, any of you, and you’ll be picking pieces of her skull off the floor.” he pulled back the hammer of the gun, and they saw he’d attached an extra-long (and illegal) magazine to it. Which often meant maximum-damage ammunition.

“You got a clean shot? Either of you?” she hissed at Romero and Rivera.

Romero aimed his laser sight at Fieretti’s right knee. He wasn’t 100% sure he could hit him from this angle and not hurt the hostage. The only light was from their flashlights, the streetlights through the windows, and distant flashes of police bubble lights outside. He had to take this chance. “I got one.” He squeezed the trigger and

shot a single round into Fieretti's kneecap. Fieretti dropped the girl, whipped his .45 around, and fired back a high-powered round into Romero's left upper thigh. The sheriff screamed as blood and torn flesh exploded outward from him.

"NOOO!" Agent Spoole squeezed off a round that hit Fieretti's forearm, sending his gun flying. Along with most of the arm as it now dangled only from a few strips of blood-wet muscle. She advanced on a kneeling, also screaming suspect and landed a kick beneath his chin, sending him sprawling. Not feeling fully in her own body anymore, she watched herself flip him on his stomach, secure zip-tie cuffs around his remains of one arm, one of her boots firmly on the back of his neck. She Mirandized him on total auto-pilot, then handed him to Rivera to haul away.

"ALEX!!" She ran to him, as he'd fallen first to his knees, then collapsed onto his back, blood spilling onto the concrete floor, sounding crazily like paint leaking from a can. In the near-darkness, it appeared black, not red. Emma leaned over him, pulled his helmet off. "How bad are you hit?!" He could only give a guttural groan in response. "Talk to me!!"

She ripped his already-ruined pant leg further apart, and she was hit with a geyser of an arterial blood splatter, all over her front, even beading onto her face. Ballistics would show the bullet was a G2 Research R.I.P. 9mm that shredded on impact. It had shredded most of the flesh on one side of his thigh, nearly to the bone, and ripped open his femoral artery.

"Emma.." he was losing consciousness, having a difficult time speaking. Not much time left.

She ripped off her own helmet and knelt closer to his face. "Alex, it's okay. We're gonna get you out of here. We got him. It's over." Her words came out in a cracking sob.

“No..too late for me..I’m..I’m so sorry, Emma. I didn’t want to...hurt you...never wanted that..just happy..I knew you.” Romero reached with one blood-covered hand and rested it on the side of her face.

Tears ran down her cheeks, landing on his face. “Don’t you fucking die on me, you son of a bitch!!” she cried out.

“I loved you, Emma...from the night..we met. If you’re with him...doesn’t matter...tell him I said...be good to you..” Then he was gone.

Sobs ripped from some deep primal place in her. The world was spinning, losing focus like a camera lens that had broken. She saw flashbacks of David shot and bleeding out, morphing in and out of being Alex, now dead in a pool of blood. Then things got blindingly bright, and she saw the sweet, loving face of her youngest nephew. He smiled, “Aunt Emma. It’s gonna be all right. We’re with you. You’re gonna go on. Come home to us.” Then that image winked out.

Emma-Christine smoothed her hand over his now-lifeless eyes, closing them. “Good-bye.” she whispered.

The warehouse parking lot was a bedlam of police, FBI, paramedics, TV news vans...and the coroner’s office. Not seeing much of any of it, Emma walked trance-like through it all.

“Oh my god!! Agent, are you hit?!” She didn’t even register exactly who said that. Maybe Rivera, maybe another agent.

She was covered in blood, the awful stickiness soaking into her clothes and running down the front of her Kevlar vest. It had grown cold so fast.

“No.” Her voice, and her eyes, were lifeless. “It’s not mine.”